

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Peninsula Campaign

By **Glenn David Brasher**, University of Alabama

During spring 1862, Major General George Brinton McClellan's Union army advanced up the Virginia Peninsula toward the Confederate capital. The campaign involved the largest amphibious operation of the war and saw perhaps Robert E. Lee's best chance to destroy the Army of the Potomac. Arriving just outside Richmond, the Federals enjoyed superior numbers, yet during a week of almost continuous fighting the Rebels used aggressive attacks to drive the Yankees away. Northern armies would not get as close to Richmond for two more years, and Southerners discovered the leader whose subsequent victories helped build and sustain Confederate nationalism. Most important, the campaign helped lead to the decision to use emancipation as a means of saving the Union.

Historians have long underappreciated the campaign's role in emancipation. Typically, the best works on the subject focus mainly on the leadership of the Army of Northern Virginia, arguing that the campaign's largest impact was the rise of the commander who would allow the South to fight on for three bloody years. This interpretation unfortunately still dominates popular perceptions, as a quick review of online sources such as Wikipedia attests. The most comprehensive book on the subject, Stephen Sears's *To the Gates of Richmond*, adds a well-supported analysis of George McClellan, demonstrating him as politically at odds with the Lincoln administration. Nevertheless, only more recently have scholars such as Mark Grimsley, Gary Gallagher, and myself, stressed the campaign's critical role in emancipation.¹

At the start of the war, Lincoln repeatedly insisted that his only war aim was the preservation of the Union. His Republican party aimed for the extinction of slavery, but understood that the Constitution protected it in the states where it existed. Therefore, their anti-slavery strategy was to prevent the institution from spreading to the western territories, stop using the government to support the system, and to encourage gradual and compensated emancipation. This platform led to Lincoln's 1860 election victory (and

¹ Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1996); Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gary W. Gallagher, *The Richmond Campaign of 1862; The Peninsula & the Seven Days* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Glenn David Brasher, *The Peninsula Campaign & the Necessity of Emancipation; African Americans and the Fight for Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

to the secession of the Confederate states in reaction) and he consistently maintained this position until the aftermath of the Peninsula Campaign.

Military events quickly challenged the North's commitment to not touch slavery in the southern states. In July 1861, Union troops were repulsed at Manassas in their first big movement into Virginia. Northern newspapers quickly pointed out that slave-built fortifications there had slowed the northern advance, and most shockingly, they claimed that blacks had been seen fighting alongside their masters. These concerns played a large role in Congress's passage of the First Confiscation Act, allowing Union armies to confiscate slaves that the Confederates had used in their military efforts.

Subsequently, emancipationists increasingly insisted that beyond the moral imperative to free the slaves, the government should do it as a "military necessity" under constitutionally granted war powers.² They pointed out that Southerners were forcing slaves to build entrenchments and that some were being coerced into combat. If the war continued, they maintained, the South would continue to use their enslaved population in these capacities in ever-growing numbers. Additionally, if the North were to free the slaves, it would not only take a strength away from the South, it would add that strength to the Union cause.

Still, most Northerners believed that twenty-one million Yankees could defeat nine million Southerners even if they were using their slaves in military roles. In 1861 there was little reason to believe otherwise. Lincoln's December address to Congress indicated that he was also not ready to accept the "military necessity" argument. These sentiments were widely praised across the North.

Meanwhile, the loss at Manassas led Lincoln to promote George B. McClellan. The cocky thirty-four-year-old officer had recently cleared the western part of Virginia of Rebel forces and now Lincoln needed him to whip the Army of the Potomac back into shape and restore its morale. McClellan competently accomplished these tasks, leading to his promotion to general-in-chief of all Union armies.

The new commander began planning a campaign to capture the Confederate capital. Rather than advance over the same ground on which they had already been repulsed, McClellan decided to float the Army of the Potomac down river around the southern defenses in northern Virginia and land the troops at Urbanna, a coastal town on Virginia's Middle Peninsula. From there, his army would capture West Point and then use the York River railroad to advance to the outskirts of Richmond. As a backup, McClellan envisioned landing farther south at Fort Monroe and marching up the Virginia Peninsula to get to West Point.

² Abolitionists and many radical Republicans insisted that the Constitution's emergency war powers gave the president the authority to emancipate slaves as a means of winning the war, and thus they often described emancipation as a "military necessity." This position heavily depended on arguments made by John Quincy Adams twenty years earlier. For a detailed discussion of the origin, legal justification, and evolution of this principle, see James Oakes, *Freedom National; The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

In early March 1862, however, Confederate General Joseph Eggleston Johnston unexpectedly abandoned his lines at Manassas, re-concentrating south of the Rappahannock River. Learning of the movement, McClellan's characteristic paranoia caused him to suspect that Johnston had discovered the Urbanna plan and thus he settled on landing at Fort Monroe. At the end of the month, the Army of the Potomac began its amphibious shift to the Virginia Peninsula.

Meanwhile, Confederate Major General John Bankhead Magruder had overseen the construction of a defensive line that stretched the entire width of the lower Virginia Peninsula, incorporating the Warwick River and connecting to defensive lines around Yorktown. That impressed slave laborers largely constructed these works did not go unnoticed by the northern populace.

By April 4, McClellan had about 90,000 men on hand to advance up the Peninsula, but his plans quickly unraveled. Poor roads and bad weather stalled the movement, and one column ran into the fortifications on the Warwick. Even more vexing, McClellan received a telegram stating that Lincoln was worried that he had gone to the Peninsula without adequately providing for Washington's defense. Therefore, one entire corps under the command of Brigadier General Irvin McDowell would not be arriving to reinforce his army as McClellan had expected.

McClellan characteristically detected a conspiracy. The general knew that radical Republicans were calling for emancipation as a "military necessity" and that his anti-emancipation sentiments were unacceptable to many in Lincoln's party. He therefore erroneously concluded that the withholding of McDowell's men was an emancipationist plot to ruin his plans. He believed that until the administration could get public support for emancipation, they intended to prolong the war and "would not permit me to succeed."³

The truth, of course, was quite different. Before McClellan left Washington, Lincoln expressed concern for the safety of the capital and was reluctant to let the general take the army to the Peninsula. McClellan persuaded Lincoln only after detailing the number of men he would leave behind. Once the army moved, Lincoln discovered that McClellan's calculations were purposely inaccurate, and thus he withheld McDowell's command.

Even without McDowell, McClellan heavily outnumbered the Confederates, but the general still refused to attack. He famously overestimated Magruder's numbers, and the slave-built fortifications were intimidating. Faced with such obstacles, McClellan decided on a siege and planned to break the Rebel lines with a massive artillery bombardment. As he landed more troops and artillery on the Peninsula, the month-long

³ George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story; the War for the Union, the soldiers who fought it, the civilians who directed it and his relations to it and to them* (New York: C. L. Webster and Company, 1887), 151.

delay allowed the Confederates to move most of the forces available in Northern Virginia to the Peninsula, strengthening Magruder's defenses. The opportunity that McClellan had for quickly overwhelming the Confederates was gone, increasing northern frustration with the Army of the Potomac's slowness.

The stalemate seemed particularly vexing in contrast to Union successes elsewhere. Since the fall of Forts Henry and Donelson back in February, the Federal navy had taken most of the Mississippi River, Nashville and Memphis had fallen, and Union troops possessed many of the coastal islands of South Carolina. Most recently, while McClellan sat immobile Ulysses S. Grant had won a big victory at Shiloh in Tennessee. It appeared to Northerners that the only obstacles in the way of ending the war were the slave-built fortifications on the Peninsula.

Much of the news coming from Virginia concerned these defenses. Slaves were observed improving the Confederate works, and it was even claimed that the South was using blacks as artillery gunners, picket guards, and sharpshooters. Emancipationists exaggeratedly reported that the South was using slaves in combat, thus maintaining that it was necessary to deprive the Rebels of the military services of their slaves.

By the start of May, McClellan was finally ready to bombard the Confederate works. However, runaway slaves increasingly came into Union lines warning that the Rebels were leaving. On May 4 these reports were confirmed by balloon reconnaissance, and Union soldiers were able to advance into the Rebel entrenchments at Yorktown without firing a shot. Joseph Johnston had ordered the withdrawal because he believed his flanks would eventually get turned by the Union navy. A position closer to the Confederate capital, he told President Jefferson Davis's military advisor Robert E. Lee, would stretch Union supply lines, protect the Confederate flanks, and bog the Union army down in the Chickahominy swamps. Davis and Lee initially disagreed, but Johnston eventually got his way and his troops evacuated the Lower Peninsula.

As they withdrew, poor roads slowed the movement and forced Johnston to send Major General James Longstreet back to Williamsburg to hold off the pursuing Federals. Longstreet placed troops in a series of previously constructed forts, creating a defensive line centered on Fort Magruder, a work that covered the junction of two roads southeast of Williamsburg. When two Union corps under Brigadier General Erasmus Darwin Keyes and Major General Edwin Vose "Bull" Sumner arrived, they planned an assault for the next day.

On May 5, sixteen slaves came into Federal lines and according to Keyes, "encouraged the belief that some of the enemy's works on his left were not occupied."⁴ Later in the day, one slave led Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock's brigade on a hidden path to the empty works, placing the Yankees in a protected position on the Rebel

⁴ United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 11, part 1, p. 512(hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 11, pt. 1, 512).

flank.

Meanwhile, however, Union troops frontally attacked Fort Magruder, but the assault quickly stalled. The Rebels then launched a ferocious counterattack led by Brigadier General Cadmus Marcellus Wilcox's brigade that would have turned the Union left flank had it not been for the timely arrival of Brigadier General Phil Kearny's division.

Over on the right, Hancock pressed for orders to advance, but was only told to withdraw. As he began to do so, he spotted Rebels moving in his direction. Longstreet had finally noticed the threat to his flank and dispatched regiments of Major General Daniel Harvey Hill's division to drive the Federals away. However, the aggressive Rebel attack faltered before the strong fortifications protecting the Yankees. Hancock then ordered a bayonet charge that completely routed the Confederates and brought in the first Rebel flag captured by the Army of the Potomac.

The Battle of Williamsburg established Hancock's reputation. In a telegram to Lincoln, McClellan claimed, "Hancock was superb today."⁵ Because the Confederates repulsed the Union's frontal assaults and successfully bought time for Johnston's withdrawal, the northern press exaggeratedly focused on Hancock's success. He gained fame and quickly moved up the chain of command, later obtaining immortality by defending against Picket's Charge at Gettysburg.

The Army of the Potomac then set out to secure West Point, the terminus of the railroad that ran from the York River to Richmond. McClellan also hoped to cut off some of the retreating Confederates. Accordingly, Union Brigadier General William Buel Franklin's division sailed up the York and landed across the river from West Point near Eltham Plantation. From there, they were to move southward to the main road that a portion of the Rebel army was using. Franklin's men came ashore during the night of May 6. The next morning, the famed Texas Brigade and a few other Confederate regiments led by the aggressive Brigadier General John Bell Hood attacked the Federals. The resulting skirmish swayed through thick woods, with both sides advancing and retreating. The Yankees ultimately held their ground and Hood withdrew, but Franklin was now unable to cut off any of the main body of retreating Rebels.

Still, the Army of the Potomac was then able to secure West Point. Union supplies now moved smoothly up the York and Pamunkey Rivers to White House Landing, where laborers unloaded them, placed them on railroad cars, and delivered them to Union troops establishing their lines in front of Richmond.

Meanwhile, Federal naval forces also made progress toward the Rebel capital. When Johnston abandoned the Lower Peninsula, southern forces in Norfolk were isolated and had to evacuate, joining the troops gathering to defend Richmond. As a result,

⁵ Glenn Tucker, *Hancock the Superb* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 89.

Federals gained control of Norfolk, the Chesapeake Bay, and the James River all the way up to a point seven miles below Richmond.

From there, Confederate fortifications at Drewry's Bluff prevented the U.S. navy from getting any closer to the city. Overlooking a sharp bend in the river, the Rebels had a large redoubt 110 feet above the water that boasted three heavy cannon and five naval guns. The fortification dominated a mile long stretch of the James. Here impressed slaves and soldiers filled the water with logs, stones and iron, drove piles into the river bottom, sank several sloops and schooners into the channel, and left only a small opening which passed directly under the guns on the bluff.

On May 15, three U.S. ironclads and two wooden gunboats attacked Drewry's Bluff. Entering a virtual shooting gallery as they approached the river obstructions, they received artillery fire from the bluff and musketry fire from sharpshooters along the bank. After three and a half hours of severe pounding, the ships backed off and headed downstream. The repulse meant that naval forces would not be able to capture the Rebel capital; McClellan's army would have to do it.

As the Army of the Potomac established lines just eight miles outside Richmond, Northern newspapers reported how Virginia's enslaved community was proving useful to the Union cause. Blacks provided road directions in an increasingly unfamiliar and hostile environment and corrected faulty Yankee maps. Congressional Radicals pointed out these facts, pushing for a Second Confiscation Act that would free slaves in the South regardless of whether they had been forced to support the Confederate military.

Yet this could legally only be done as a war measure, and thus it would have to be deemed a "military necessity". Was it? The Union army's advance on the Peninsula, coupled with the North's consistent successes in the western theater suddenly made the "military necessity" argument seem questionable. During spring 1862, Northern troops were everywhere advancing, and the Confederates were seemingly falling back to their last ditch.

Had Lincoln's thoughts changed? The president had recently supported several emancipationist endeavors: the prohibition of slavery in Washington and in the western territories, as well as a treaty with Britain to more effectively suppress the international slave trade. Perhaps most dramatically, he was aggressively pressuring the Border States to accept compensated emancipation and had gotten Congress to approve funding for it. Nevertheless, none of this indicated a change in Lincoln's thinking about slavery in the seceded states. In fact, they are consistent with what he had always believed; that the government should stop slavery's spread, withdraw support for it, and promote compensated emancipation. Otherwise, slavery could not be touched in the southern states under the Constitution.

Meanwhile, as Union soldiers laboriously constructed fortifications in stifling humidity, they bitterly complained about the fact that impressed slaves had largely built the South's formidable defenses. They were also well aware that the slaves were more

than willing to work on Union lines, and thus the soldiers grew increasingly frustrated that the Union was not employing the enslaved community in this capacity. Those pushing for emancipation echoed these complaints in the northern press and on the floors of Congress.

On the other side of the lines, Joseph Johnston faced increasing pressure from civilians and the Confederate government alike to finally launch an attack on the Union troops getting comfortable just outside of Richmond. On May 31 he responded by striking McClellan's left at the Battle of Seven Pines. Johnston's plan involved complicated and questionable maneuvers that his officers failed to effectively coordinate. The two-day slugfest did not drive away the Yankees, but it did have two major results: Johnston was wounded and was replaced by Robert E. Lee, and McClellan shifted troops to his left, leaving Brigadier General Fitz John Porter's V Corps disconnected from the rest of the army by the Chickahominy River.

As the new commander of the soon-to-be-labeled Army of Northern Virginia, Lee quickly resolved on further offensive operations against McClellan. On June 13 he sent Brigadier General James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart's cavalry to reconnoiter McClellan's position north of the river, resulting in the famous "Ride around McClellan" that revealed the V Corps' isolated position. The aggressive Lee then decided to depend on his largely slave-built fortifications to keep Richmond secure from McClellan's roughly 120,000 soldiers, while around 65,000 of his own men would strike Porter's isolated V Corps.

Stalled before Richmond, McClellan grew increasingly frustrated by Lincoln's refusal to reinforcements. In particular, the general coveted the 35,000 men stationed at Manassas under the command of Irvin McDowell, as well the 8,000 soldiers serving with Major General Nathaniel Prentiss Banks in the Shenandoah Valley. Lincoln, however, continued to worry about the safety of Washington, and Lee had sent Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson into the Shenandoah Valley to exploit those fears. After a series of successful engagements, Jackson managed to drive General Banks's command across the Potomac River and appeared to threaten the U.S. capital. Lincoln was alarmed, refused to send McClellan reinforcements, and encouraged him to "either attack Richmond or give up the job and come to the defense of Washington."⁶

Lee and Jackson brilliantly manipulated Lincoln's fears, but McClellan, for once, understood the situation. All his military intelligence indicated that Jackson's campaign was merely a decoy. He explained to the president, "The object of the movement is probably to prevent reinforcements being sent to me. All the information obtained from balloons, deserters, prisoners, and [fugitive slaves] agrees in the statement that the mass of the rebel troops are still in the immediate vicinity of Richmond, ready to defend it."⁷ Unworried by Stonewall Jackson's movements, McClellan continued to follow his own timetable.

⁶ *O.R.*, I, 11, pt. 1, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*

As McClellan sat inactive, Lee recalled Stonewall Jackson from the Shenandoah Valley to hit Porter's corps from the north while he crossed the Chickahominy River to strike it from the west. Because McClellan's supply line, the Richmond-West Point Railroad, lay north of the river, if Lee's planned assault could dislodge Union troops there, McClellan would be cut off from his base at White House Landing.

While Lee prepared to cross the Chickahominy River, the location of Jackson's troops was a mystery to the Federal command. The War Department informed McClellan that they had no reliable intelligence on Stonewall's location. Fortunately for McClellan, many slaves around Richmond knew Jackson's whereabouts. One runaway warned the Yankees that the Confederates were about to cross the Chickahominy River near Mechanicsville. A slave from Richmond reported hearing that Jackson was about to attack the Federal rear. Other runaways claimed to have seen troops, supposedly Jackson's, just to the northeast of Porter's position. Finally, a fugitive came into Union lines and confirmed that Jackson was about to attack Porter.

Piecing the information together, McClellan correctly interpreted Lee's intentions. Because McClellan himself would never contemplate such a bold attack unless he outnumbered his opponent, the timid general concluded that his worst fears were true and that Lee enjoyed a large numerical advantage. His immediate concern was to save the V Corps, and on June 25 he crossed to the north side of the Chickahominy River to arrange a defense, placing a division behind a strong position at Beaver Dam Creek. General Porter sent cavalry off to the north and west to look for Jackson, and detailed axe men to fell trees and obstruct the southern advance. Thanks in part to intelligence received from runaway slaves, there would be no surprise attack on the V Corps.

When the Rebels attacked on June 26, the information gleaned from blacks helped Union troops win the Battle of Mechanicsville. As Lee's men charged frontally, Jackson failed to attack Porter's flank and rear. There are many reasons for Stonewall's failures that day, especially extreme fatigue. However, his problems also included the obstructions placed in his path. For example, he was delayed nearly an hour by a burned bridge. Union cavalry also harassed Jackson's troops and he insisted on deploying skirmishers each time he encountered them. Back at Beaver Dam Creek, in the absence of a support flank attack by Jackson, the Confederates stood little chance of carrying the defensive line and were bloodily repulsed.

Still, Lee's aggressiveness caused McClellan to believe that his army was heavily outnumbered, and he decided to withdraw from the north side of the river. Abandoning the north of the river meant giving up the railroad and the York River as a supply line and required moving the whole army south to the James River. McClellan had surrendered the initiative to Lee.

As they moved toward the Chickahominy River, the V Corps had to take a defensive position to fight off the combined attacks of Lee and Jackson. The resulting Battle of Gaines' Mill on June 27 was the largest that either army had fought up to that time, with Lee hurling nearly 60,000 men in frontal assaults on the Union V Corps.

Porter's outnumbered men skillfully held their ground for most of the day, until a coordinated Rebel attack along the entire length of the Union front forced the Federals from the field and across the river. The victory was Lee's first as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia.

After the fight, the Yankees ran for the James River and the Rebels aggressively attempted to destroy the Army of the Potomac before it reached safety. The Union army was in full flight, but a rear guard action at Savage's Station helped hold off the Confederates. Over the next few days, Lee attempted to maneuver several widely dispersed columns to trap the Yankees, repeatedly forcing them to fend off attacks and in the process capturing large amounts of supplies and prisoners.

Lee's best chance to destroy the Army of the Potomac came on June 30 at a crossroads known as Glendale where he brilliantly had several columns of men converging on the Federals in front, left and rear. Nevertheless, he could not get his dispersed units to cooperate properly (particularly vexing was Stonewall Jackson's lack of aggression in the Union rear at White Oak Swamp). After desperate fighting, the Yankees slipped away and set up a powerful defensive position on the gentle slopes of Malvern Hill.

The next day, the Federals used their superior artillery under the command of Colonel Henry Jackson Hunt to repulse repeated and poorly coordinated Rebel frontal assaults, winning what turned out to be the last of seven consecutive days of combat (afterwards known as The Seven Days Battles). Many Union officers felt that the army should have followed up the victory at Malvern Hill with an offensive of their own, but McClellan had already decided to reach the safety of naval gunboats on the James River. Thanks largely to roads and directions pointed out by the enslaved population, by July 3 the bulk of the Army of the Potomac had safely reached Harrison's Landing on the James River. Naval guns protected them from further assaults by General Lee, but McClellan had failed to capture Richmond.

In just seven bloody days, Lee's army had saved the Confederate capital and restored southern morale. More important, while trying to coordinate the pursuit of McClellan's army Lee quickly learned which officers he could rely upon, and those who needed weeding out. The result was the forging of the mighty Army of Northern Virginia that went on to a string of victories, helping to build and sustain the Confederate nationalism that allowed the South to fight on for close to three years despite their inferior resources.

The campaign also changed the direction of the war in an even more profound way. At Harrison's Landing, many Union soldiers repeatedly and angrily commented on the dispirited and physically fatigued condition of their army. In their minds, the Rebels had hit them so energetically because the South had been using their slaves to build entrenchments, thus their soldiers were not as worn out from fatigue duty as Union soldiers.

Politicians soon took up this argument. One example was New York's conservative Republican political boss Thurlow Weed. He publically insisted that had the government emancipated the slaves when the war started, "at least a half a million of slaves who have been at work in the rebel armies, would have been relieving our worn-out troops from exhausting drudgery—thus *weakening* the enemy, and *strengthening* ourselves in corresponding degree." Reprinting Weed's letter, the *Washington Chronicle* added, "There is no resisting such an argument as this."⁸

Congress was still debating the Second Confiscation Act, and Radicals used the failed Peninsula Campaign to demonstrate the Confederacy's effective use of impressed slaves. They also argued that the aid that blacks had given to the army in the form of military intelligence deserved to be rewarded with freedom, and that this aid could be expanded if the new Confiscation Act was passed. Many moderates and conservatives were now joining the Radicals in making such arguments. The *New York Commercial Advertiser* observed that emancipation sentiment in Congress had "made a greater advance since the Army of the Potomac found its new base on the James, than during the whole fifteen months since [Fort] Sumter fell."⁹

Because of the momentum created by the failed campaign, Congress decided to couple the confiscation bill with a new Militia Act authorizing the president to recruit African Americans as military laborers, and possibly as soldiers, with freedom as the reward. "The question must now be decided whether [blacks] shall be employed only to aid the rebels," Ohio's conservative senator John Sherman told Congress. "Shall we avail ourselves of their services, or shall the enemy alone use them?"¹⁰

Indeed, the Peninsula Campaign's failure turned out to be the last push Congress needed to pass the Second Confiscation Act. Massachusetts's radical Senator Charles Sumner was one of the bill's leading supporters, and he recalled that Congress passed it "under pressure from our reverses at Richmond."¹¹ The new law mandated that all slaves owned by Rebels were free, whether they had been used in Confederate service or not. Unfortunately, this opened the door for masters to possibly reclaim their slaves if they could prove in court that they were never disloyal to the Union. This had the potential for clogging up the courts, and made the Act fairly unworkable. As a result, it freed few slaves.

Despite the act's weaknesses, however, in the wake of McClellan's failure there was a perceptible shift in public opinion on emancipation. While home in Ohio, Senator Sherman wrote his brother, "You can form no conception at the change of opinion here as to the negro question. Men of all parties now understand the magnitude of the contest . . .

⁸ *Boston Daily Journal*, July 12, 1862; *Washington Chronicle*, July 13, 1862.

⁹ *New York Commercial Advertiser*, quoted in *Cincinnati Gazette*, July 15, 1862.

¹⁰ Cong. Globe, 37th Cong., 2d Sess. 3198-9 (1862).

¹¹ Charles Sumner, *The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*. 2 vols. Edited by Beverly Wilson Palmer (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:122.

and agree that we must seek their aid and make it the interest of the negroes to help us.”¹²

This included the president. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles recalled that just days after the campaign Lincoln said that he “had about come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity, absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union, that we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued.”¹³ Welles maintained that the failed Peninsula Campaign had swayed the president into this new course of action.

This was a dramatic shift. The president had long dedicated himself to ridding the country of slavery, but only by stopping its expansion, not using the government to support it, and using the government to encourage states to do it themselves. But less than two weeks after the failed Peninsula Campaign he was intent on a new course. Welles indicated that Lincoln said, “slaves were undeniably an element of strength” to the Confederacy not only because they worked the land, but also “because thousands of them were in attendance upon the armies in the field And the fortifications and entrenchments were constructed by them.” Lincoln concluded, “we must decide whether that element should be with us, or against us.”¹⁴

Four days later, Lincoln signed the Second Confiscation Act into law, but he also had something bigger in mind. On July 22 he informed his cabinet of his intention to release the Emancipation Proclamation. Such a step would get around the weaknesses of the Second Confiscation Act because it would free all slaves in states that were in rebellion whether their masters were Rebels or not. Court proceedings would not be required. However, Secretary of State William Seward convinced Lincoln to wait until after a victory so that it would not appear as an act of desperation. Lincoln agreed, and that victory would not come until September at Antietam. Yet Lincoln had firmly resolved on a course of action long before then.

Of course, many Northerners continued to reject the “military necessity” argument even after the Peninsula Campaign, and Lincoln’s enemies later accused him of engineering and conducting the war primarily as an emancipationist crusade. His response was clear: “It is and will be carried on so long as I am president for the sole purpose of restoring the Union. But no human power can subdue this rebellion without using the emancipation lever as I have done.”¹⁵

As for the timing, Lincoln said: “Many . . . urged emancipation before I thought it was indispensable.” Thus, the timing of his July 1862 decision seems to indicate that it was the failed campaign that convinced him it was “indispensable.” In the final measure,

¹² Rachel Sherman Thorndike, ed., *Correspondence Between General and Senator Sherman from 1837 to 1891* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1894), 156-7.

¹³ Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson*. 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 1:70-71.

¹⁴ Ibid; Gideon Welles, “The History of Emancipation.” In *The Galaxy*, 14 (Dec. 1872), 842-3.

¹⁵ Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Lincoln* .9 vols. Edited by Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 7: 506-7.

this is the primary significance of the Peninsula Campaign.¹⁶

¹⁶ Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House with Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1866), 77.